

29 October 1965

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Reasons for the Attack at Plei Me

1. This memo is designed to consider several questions posed by the Viet Cong assault at the Civilian Irregular Defense Group Special Forces camp at Plei Me in Pleiku Province. The Communists persisted for eight days in an effort to subdue the post even though it must have been clear after the first few days, as strong reinforcements arrived and air and artillery support became heavy, to the Viet Cong commander that he had lost whatever chance he had to overcome the garrison. Plei Me, some 25 miles southwest of Pleiku town, the provincial capital, is not astride a major line of communication, and it is not an important administrative center.

2. Nevertheless the Viet Cong marshalled an assault force estimated to include at least one PAVN regiment

25X1 a battalion [redacted] and probably additional local forces. This force was initially committed against the original Plei Me garrison consisting of approximately 400 men--four CIDG companies and 12 US Special Forces advisors. Relief forces consisted of three ARVN battalions--including armor elements--and significant elements of the 1st Cavalry Division (Air-mobile). The fighting, extremely heavy at times, included a partially successful Viet Cong ambush of the overland relief column. Overall casualties on both sides were heavy. Friendly losses stand at 111 killed (12 US), 231 wounded (5 US), and 25 missing. Enemy losses included 316 killed (201 by body count), six captured, 97 weapons (including 12 heavy anti-aircraft machine guns). The US also lost a total of five aircraft.

3. Reasons for the intensity, duration, and persistence of the Communist attack on Plei Me may be subsumed under three broad, and often overlapping categories: a) elimination of GVN presence in the highlands; b) Plei Me was an obstacle to future Viet Cong intentions; and c) a tactical maneuver designed to destroy more ARVN or US forces. These reasons remain in the realm of speculation largely because of the lack of positive sustaining documentary or prisoner information.

4. Based on what we already know of Viet Cong intentions and operations the Plei Me action could have been part of the overall Viet Cong effort to eliminate the GVN presence from the highlands. Since early June the GVN has lost four district capitals to the Viet Cong in the highlands region. Most of these also had CIDG camps nearby. The capitals are: Le Thanh, located in western Pleiku Province, overrun in early June; Tou Morong, in northeastern Kontum Province, lost at the end of June; Thuan Mon in southwest Phu Bon, overrun in late June; and Dak Sut, abandoned after a fierce Viet Cong assault in mid-August. Also, in August, the CIDG camp at Duc Co (only 25 miles northwest of Plei Me) on Route 19 near the Cambodian border came under heavy and sustained Viet Cong attack by what is estimated to have been a regimental-sized force. If Duc Co had been lost, effective GVN control of Pleiku Province would have extended only as far west as the province capital.

5. The Viet Cong may have considered that Plei Me was an obstacle to some larger and more important courses of action and so justified the major expenditure of manpower. The attack could have been intended to divert attention away from the current movement of large Viet Cong units in and adjacent to the highlands area.

Patrolling activity from Plei Me may have been hampering Viet Cong movement.

6. The Plei Me attack may even have been a purely tactical effort in order to lure out relief forces and then cut them to pieces in a series of ambushes. This tactic is now almost a classic one with the Viet Cong, as it was with the Viet Minh against the French, but does not alone seem to justify the extended action at Plei Me. However, according to press reports, a prisoner taken at Plei Me maintains that the operation was designed primarily to lure out a rescue force from the US 1st Cavalry Division. Annihilation of this force would have provided the Viet Cong a tremendous psychological and propaganda victory. The secondary mission, according to the prisoner, was to eliminate the CIDG camp.

7. Another consideration that should be taken into account is the thinking of the Viet Cong command. In the past, the Communists have proved themselves to be remarkably adroit in the planning of military operations, exercising great flexibility, imagination and daring, but once an operation is underway the troop commander has to adhere closely to the established operational plan. This may provide a partial answer to why the Viet Cong commander did not leave the field earlier, when it must have been clear to him that air-power was going to prevent his overrunning the camp and that there was no way in which he could, with the forces at hand, prevent the relief of the garrison.

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